

# THE THEME OF LOVE IN YEMENITE HEBREW LITERATURE\*

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THE EROTIC IMPULSE is a vital and dynamic force in life, and the theme of love is ageless and universal. "A pretty girl, a cup of wine, a garden, the song of a bird, the murmur of a brook"—proclaims Moshe Ibn Ezra—"are the cure of the lover, the joy of the distressed . . . the wealth of the poor, and the medicine of the sick."<sup>1</sup> Thus Ibn Ezra advises:

Cling to the breast of the beautiful by night  
And kiss the lips of the pretty by day.<sup>2</sup>

This prescription of Moshe Ibn Ezra for a happy and joyful life is characteristic of many of the Medieval Spanish Hebrew poets. Despite their deep piety, these poets knew how to express in their writings the splendor of the fields and flowery meadows, and the enchantment of feminine beauty.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, these writings offer us a glimpse into the hidden vistas of their lives: their joys and sorrows, their triumphs and frustrations. The greatness of poetry, says Mordell, is in its eroticism, for it is "most true then to life, which is largely erotic" (1976, p. 15).

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1. See *Seper he'anaq* (*The Necklace*, also known as *The Tarshish*), Part 3, verses 52–55.

2. See Pagis (1970, p. 272). On Ibn Ezra's songs of wine and love, see pp. 253–280.

3. See Zinberg (1972, vol. I, pp. 65–69; 83–89). On the erotic element in Medieval Hebrew poetry, see Haberman (1972, pp. 47–50).

Quite different is the attitude of Rabbi Shalom Shabazi,<sup>4</sup> the most celebrated of the Yemenite Hebrew poets, who in one of his poems proudly proclaims: 'I have not wasted my verse on amorous themes.'<sup>5</sup> This attitude, one may safely assert, is typical of the Yemenite Hebrew poets. Yemenite Hebrew literature, as reflected in the extant body of Yemenite works, is predominantly preoccupied with two themes: the suffering of Kneset Israel in Exile (*galut*) and the great expectation for speedy redemption (*g'v'ulla*). In spite of the profound prosodic and thematic influence which the Spanish school of Hebrew literature exerted upon Yemenite Hebrew literature, secular themes are scant in the latter. Poems pertaining to amusement and conviviality (שירי ששעשועים), particularly those expressive of the erotic impulse and the pleasures of love and passion, are marginal in Yemenite writings.<sup>6</sup>

Passionate chords of love were, however, sounded within the framework of Yemenite sacred poetry. In a manner characteristic of the Kabbalah and mysticism, Yemenite poets used images, motifs and language of secular love poetry to describe the ecstasy of divine love.<sup>7</sup> To express the bond between Israel, the Torah, and the Messiah, Yemenite poets incorporated erotic and sensuous language in eulogistic poems of friendship, styled in the manner of the ancient Arabic ode (*qasīda*).<sup>8</sup> The *qasīda* which for a long time was the literary medium of Arabic poetry, was also prevalent in medieval Spanish Hebrew literature. This genre in which panegyric was a central theme, would charac-

4. Rabbi Shalom Shabazi was born in 1619 and died after 1680. He is considered to be the greatest poet of Yemenite Jewry. He was a prolific writer, and his poems are noted for their poetic spirit and loftiness of thought. His poems express an unquenchable thirst for God as the ultimate goal of life; they encourage clinging to the Torah as the source of life and warn against the cheating disillusionment of the materialistic world.

Shabazi left his strong impress upon Yemenite Jewry, who meticulously interpreted his poems and commented upon them, searching for esoteric messages and religious symbolism. On account of his charismatic character, legends clustered around his life and personality, and to this day he is revered by the Yemenites as a saint, capable of performing miracles from his grave (see Hoze, 1973, pp. 27–45).

5. *Hapeš hayyim* (1966, p. 171). *Hapeš hayyim* is the most extensive collection in print of Yemenite poetry.

6. See Ratzaby (1965a, pp. 133–165). The sources of Yemenite Hebrew poetry are ancient and may go back to the liturgical poetry (*piyyut*) of Babylon and Eretz Israel (cf. the poetic introductions to the *Midraš haggadol*, edited by M. Margaliot, 1967, pp. 17–18). The earliest traces of Spanish influence on Yemenite literature may be discerned in the poetry of Rabbi Daniel b' Rabbi Fayyumi who lived in the first half of the twelfth century. Fayyumi is also the earliest Yemenite Jewish poet known to us by name. His only three extant poems are dedicated to the *Yamim nora'im* (Days of Awe). See Tobi (1979, pp. 29–38).

7. See Scholem (1941).

8. On the *qasida*, see Blachère's exhaustive index and bibliography (1952–1966), Bateson (1970, pp. 23–29), Jacobi (1971), Nicholson (1966, pp. 76–78), and Gibb (1966, pp. 13–31); see also the entry '*kasida*' in the new edition of *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. IV, pp. 713–714.

teristically begin with the *nasīb* or erotic prelude, and then shift abruptly and skillfully to the subject proper of the poem: the enumeration of the great virtues of a noble, a patron or a friend.<sup>9</sup>

Persecution and suffering marked the life of the Yemenite Jews.<sup>10</sup> The Torah provided them with both refuge and guidance through their difficult life, and at the same time allured them, and helped to alleviate their agony. Consequently, they often sang songs of love to the Torah, their beloved bride, and aspired to a total spiritual union with 'her.' In such poems the mundane is fused with the sacred, the carnal with the spiritual.<sup>11</sup> The Torah is often referred to as *יעלת חן*, 'אילת אהבים'<sup>12</sup> 'a lovely doe,' 'a graceful gazelle,' as can be seen in the following lines, which constitute the *nasīb* of a poem singing the praise of Sə'adia ben Natan'el:<sup>13</sup>

I have a lovely gazelle, a damsel  
 She is like unto the moon.  
 Or the splendor of the sun  
 Rising at morn.  
 She abounds with wisdom  
 The choice of my heart.  
 She is upright and poised  
 And endowed with beauty.  
 My soul cleaves unto her  
 And I am her slave.  
 Coverlets she has made  
 Of fine linen and silk embroidery.<sup>14</sup>  
 She has adorned my head  
 With crown and diadem forever.  
 She said: How long will you sleep?  
 Morning has dawned!  
 Behold, I have already prepared  
 Five voices<sup>15</sup> — all for you.

9. This artistic rift from the erotic introduction to the subject proper is known in Spanish Hebrew poetry as *יפי ההחלצות* 'the beauty of extrication or release.' See Yelin (1972, pp. 73–88).

10. See Ahroni (1978, pp. 267–294).

11. On the division of the Yemenite Jews' existence between the mundane and the spiritual, the physical and mystical reality, see Bargad (1971, pp. 231–248).

12. See Shabazi in *Hapes hayyim* (p. 43). These appellatives are based on Prov. 5:19.

13. The acrostics indicate that this poem was written by David ben Gad of the fifteenth century (see Ratzaby, 1968, pp. 137–139).

14. Based on Prov 31:22.

15. Referring to the five voices of rejoicing, as enumerated in Jer 25:10: the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones.

For it is you I have chosen  
 Come, ascend the stairs.  
 Come out unto me  
 Walking along my path,  
 Because innocent are my ways  
 Righteous is my course.

How enchanting is the sound  
 Of your voice,<sup>16</sup> my beloved.  
 When I go to your abode  
 You heal my malady.  
 Let me mount your bed  
 For this I have ever desired . . .

Of the same sentiment are the following verses:<sup>17</sup>

My desire is for the pristine princess  
 Who sings glorious hymns.  
 She intones songs of wisdom  
 Accompanied by drum and lyre.

The radiance of her countenance is like the sun  
 Awesome as a lion.  
 Her splendor and glory will never depart  
 She is my sun and my moon.  
 In you my soul finds rest,  
 Nectar and balsam too.  
 Sweet juice from her mouth  
 Fell to my lot.  
 I shall not hunger nor thirst  
 She is my portion, my good fortune.

Like the Torah, the Messiah was the object of the Yemenites' affections. The poems addressed to the Messiah are an outpouring of yearning for redemption. The Yemenite Jews, like their persecuted brethren elsewhere, awaited the advent of the Redeemer with great anticipation. They sang his glory, expressing love and exultation. At times they turn to him in plaintive tones, demanding his immediate appearance. They vent their innermost feelings in a language expressive of the universal theme of unrequited love. They complain of being forsaken by their lover, and give expression to the torments of separation. They recall the idyllic relations of old and beg their beloved to return promptly to his

16. See Cant 2:14.

17. A fifteenth century poem written by Hazmaq (=Sa'id, in accordance with the principle of **אחב"ש**). See Ratzaby (1968, pp. 142–143).

“comely habitation.” Such strain of both agony and passion is articulated in the following:<sup>18</sup>

I adjure you, O my beloved  
 In the name of Love  
 And in the name of the gracious and dear maiden  
 To cure the heart of the love-sick,  
 Who faint with thirst (for you).  
 Too long have you wandered about,  
 Please return to your beloved’s comely habitation  
 So that it may not be desolate.  
 Shine upon her with glory and splendor  
 Appear with your wisdom and majestic hand.  
 With the moisture of your lips  
 And the nectar of your utterance  
 Speak kindly to her words of consolation.

To this category of sacred love poetry belongs Shalom Shabazi’s most celebrated poem *’Ahabat Hadassa* ‘The love for Hadassah.’ In this poem, whose imagery echoes some of Halevi’s poems, particularly *Libbi bāmizrah* ‘My Heart is in the East,’ Shabazi gives utterance to his people’s profound yearnings for Zion. Like Halevi, Shabazi sees himself as a prisoner of passion for Jerusalem, to which he consecrates his heart, soul and mind. Shabazi pours forth his grief at Israel’s misery in the *galut*, but at the same time sings Israel’s absolute faith in ultimate redemption. *’Ahabat Hadassa* is remarkable for its simplicity of language and depth of religious thought. A strain of passionate love for Zion emanates from it, charged with beauty and emotional power.<sup>19</sup>

The Love for Hadassah is bound up in my heart  
 But I, deep in Exile my feet are sinking.  
 Would that I were able, I would go up and become one  
 With the gates of Zion, the glorious ones.  
 Morning and evening the Princess I do recall  
 My heart, my very being throbs with desire.  
 . . . . .  
 This is a glorious day for the precious *’ayumma*<sup>20</sup>  
 She and her beloved reciprocate grace and affection  
 . . . . .  
 With the cup of salvation I will rejoice and sing  
 I will reveal my secret to all.

18. *Hapeš hayyim*, p. 36. The name and time of the author are not known.

19. Ratzaby (1968, pp. 122–123).

20. *’ayumma* is an appellation for Kneset Israel.

.....  
 My soul surges with love unto the goodness of the Lord  
 Blessed is He who rewards all good deeds.

Although the echo of suffering rather than the joy of life dominates Yeminite Hebrew literature, there are a few secular poems in which the splendor of nature and the charm of feminine beauty find expression. These poems, however, are not frivolously erotic, nor do they ardently describe the object of their affection.<sup>21</sup> The intense feelings of love are conveyed through subtle formulations, bearing sensual connotations, as can be seen in the following verses which give expression to the anguish of separation:<sup>22</sup>

I am ill because you have gone  
 And my heart cries out for you.  
 I am drowning in a sea of separation  
 And there is none to draw me, save you.  
 Turn to me and be gracious unto me  
 And inscribe me in your book.  
 Do not withdraw your grace from your beloved  
 who is ailing and debased.  
 I eagerly await your letter  
 With eyes fixed in anticipation  
 Because it is the balm of my pangs  
 And through it my agony will be assuaged.  
 I will hold fast to your love till the heavens wear out . . .

The relationship between love poems and dreams has often been noted. The erotic impulse, when unfulfilled in reality, may find expression in dreams. Thus dreams serve not only as an outlet for erotic fantasies, but also as a bridge between painful reality and the object of desire. Such use of this artistic device of dream and fantasy is exemplified in the following verses:<sup>23</sup>

He appears in my dreams  
 He enters my reflections

21. Compare for example the licentious poems of Emanuel of Rome, in Haberman (1946). See also Israel Najara's poems, about which Bialik wrote in his *Širatenu ha'cc'ira*: "Just as the Italian 'Don Juan' with the bunch of flowers in his hand, sings to his señora in Italian, behind the window, on a spring night, thus Rabbi Israel Najara, with the ashes on his head sings with the very same melody and in the Holy Tongue to the Holy One, Blessed be He and His Shekhinah, by the Holy Ark at midnight prayers" (Bialik, 1962, p. 249).

22. Written by Abraham ben Halpon. See Ratzaby (1968, p. 140).

23. Ratzaby (1968, pp. 141-142).

My magnificent Uzalian<sup>24</sup>  
 Whose cheeks are as bright as the moon.  
 Enchanting are his eyes  
 More radiant than a ruby.  
 He captivates my heart  
 With his beaded throat.

Like a scarlet thread  
 So his lips are red  
 His teeth are crystalline  
 Resembling marble.  
 Firmly fastened they appeared  
 Looking like pearls and turquoise.  
 This is my lot and my portion  
 No more do I ask.

So let him stand beside me  
 Carried by the wings of dreams.  
 His countenance is comely  
 Lustrous like a cut diamond.

.....  
 My beloved is my banner  
 The sweet nectar of the Sharon.

A paragon of wisdom  
 Is Ben-Abram, the noble one.  
 I inhale your fragrance  
 Which never grows faint.  
 You have hardened your heart, 'Amram  
 And relinquished me.  
 I beseech you, O Lord  
 Restore my joy.

A tender interplay between dream and reality is articulated in the following:<sup>25</sup>

She perceived an image in her dream and said:  
 Who kissed me while I slept?  
 Recognizing that it was my image  
 She disavowed saying: I am but dreaming  
 And I said: If this were a dream, then who is the one  
 Who put a ring on your left finger?  
 And she was silent, knowing that what I said  
 Was right and my words—true.

24. 'Uzal is a name for San'a, the capital of Yemen.

25. Ratzaby (1968, p. 150).

Then she took a veil and covered her face  
 And I understood that she was embarrassed by that.  
 She concealed her cheeks, but they shone behind  
 Her veil as the sun wrapped in a cloud.  
 If you ask me how she looks, I would testify  
 And my testimony shall abide:  
 She transcends grace and beauty . . .<sup>26</sup>

The language of the Yemenite poems is permeated with biblical phrases and allusions, as is Hebrew poetry in general and medieval Hebrew poetry in particular. As Robert Alter (1976, p. 1371) rightly observed, the poet can “dialectically engage an earlier Hebrew text with the slightest passing gesture—by the collocation of two or three words from a biblical phrase, sometimes even by a peculiarity of rhythm, syntax, or grammar that recalls a classic source.” The *šibbus* ‘mosaic style’ stimulated the imagination and challenged the intelligence of the reader, making the poem an intellectual and emotional intercourse between poet and audience.<sup>27</sup>

The biblical precedent for the use of erotic imagery in religious poetry is the Song of Songs. The Yemenites, like Hebrew poets elsewhere, acknowledged its influence by directly alluding to it or by adapting its literary devices. The following poem is a typical example of Yemenite adaptation and emulation.<sup>28</sup>

Hark, my beloved knocks<sup>29</sup>  
 I shall open to my beloved  
 I shall answer from afar  
 I shall say to my lover

26. A further example of this poetic type, expressive of the craving for the beloved through the medium of dream, can be seen in the following verses composed by Zacharia al-Dahri. See Ratzaby (1968, pp. 146–147):

As in a dream I see an apparition  
 I behold a cloud from the north side  
 Like a human form wrapped in humility,  
 In a coat of righteousness, and on his countenance—the Shekhina  
 A paragon of wisdom, a kin to beauty and splendor  
 There is no end to his glorious virtues.  
 Seven prominent sages surrounded him  
 And with him they were eight.  
 My dreams carried me to them  
 And my heart was wakeful, though my body was dormant . . .

27. On the rhetoric of allusion and analogy, see Gordis (1965, pp. 190–207). On the *šibbus* as an artistic device in Hebrew medieval literature, see Kozodoy (1977, pp. 117–126), Pagis (1976, pp. 70–77), and Fleischer (1975, pp. 103–104).

28. Ratzaby (1968, p. 155).

29. See Cant 5:2.

If you so desire  
     Come suckle at my breast<sup>30</sup>  
 My sweet honey  
     The balsam of my Gilead.  
  
 I beseech you not to look at me  
     Till I am adorned  
 Because my children have afflicted me  
     They and my mother's sons  
 They made me guard (their vineyards)  
     I did not guard my own<sup>31</sup>  
 All my vineyards are barren  
     I have nothing in hand.  
 . . . . .  
 Hold your peace, O beloved  
     You are lovely and pure  
 There is no blemish in you  
     You are radiant like the sun.  
 Come along with me  
     To the chamber in my mother's house.<sup>32</sup>  
 She answered from afar  
     Come, let us take our fill of love.<sup>33</sup>  
  
 When she rose to open  
     Her hand dripped myrrh<sup>34</sup>  
 The wind wafted  
     The sweet smelling myrrh to him<sup>35</sup>  
 Like the fragrance of an apple from a tree<sup>36</sup>  
     Planted beside streams of water  
 Even like a brook of Sorek  
     Like the fruit of Ein-Gedi.<sup>37</sup>

In my opinion, the sweetest and most tender of all the Yemenite secular love poems is "Shalom."<sup>38</sup> The precise date of the composition of this poem is not known. However, according to Yehuda Ratzaby, the *terminus ad quem* of its composition is the fifteenth century.<sup>39</sup> The name of its author as spelled out in

30. See Isa 60:16

31. See Cant 1:6.

32. Cant 3:4.

33. See Prov 7:18.

34. See Cant 5:5.

35. Cant 5:13.

36. Cant 7:8.

37. Cant 1:14.

38. Ratzaby (1968, p. 149).

39. Ratzaby (1968, p. 149)

acrostics at the beginning of the poem's stanzas, is Natan'el. Like the verses quoted above, "Shalom" is written in accordance with the principles of Arabic quantitative metrics (משקל היתדות), which were widely used in medieval Hebrew literature, including that of Yemen.

The following is a translation of "Shalom":

Shalom, by you I have sworn,  
Upon your life I say  
Because you I have loved  
Come to my abode, Shalom.

Drink wine from my cup<sup>40</sup>  
Eat bread from my table<sup>41</sup>  
Smell the fragrance of my spices<sup>42</sup>  
Abide in happiness, Shalom.

Let us take our fill of love, O beloved.  
I will spread my hand over your head<sup>43</sup>  
I shall impart my secret to your heart  
Abide in happiness, Shalom.—

Embrace your maiden, O beloved.  
Who shines like the rays of the sun<sup>44</sup>  
Come closer and feel my mouth  
I will delight in you, Shalom.

Delight in my bosom,  
Cleave to me and grant my portion<sup>45</sup>  
Taste the honey of my saliva<sup>46</sup>  
Stored in my mouth for you, Shalom.<sup>47</sup>

Arise, O beloved, and quench my thirst  
Sate me with juicy wine;<sup>48</sup>  
Upon your life, O beloved, revive me  
Kiss my lips, O Shalom.<sup>49</sup>

40. Alludes to Cant 1:2,4; 4:10; 8:2.

41. Based on II Sam 12:3.

42. Based on Cant 1:3; 1:12; 4:11; 7:9. Odor is an essential element in love.

43. This expression bears sexual connotation. See Ruth 3:9, Ezek 16:8.

44. Based on Cant 6:10.

45. Based on Prov 30:8. See also Exod 21:10.

46. Based on Cant 4:11.

47. Alludes to Ps 31:20; Cant 7:14.

48. Cant 8:2.

49. Cant 1:2.

Whenever I see you on the ground  
 I prostrate myself upon the earth  
 I desire none but you,  
 Only you, my beloved, Shalom.

While "Shalom" expresses intense longing for the beloved and her reach for affection, it is not explicitly sexual. Of the beloved's physical attributes the poet mentions only her lucent skin and radiant form, which "shines like the rays of the sun." No additional physical details are provided.

The lover's craving is enveloped in allusion, which is conveyed through images and subtle formulations, bearing delicate sexual connotations. Thus, Shalom is encouraged by his lover to come and drink of her wine, to smell her fragrance, to delight in her bosom, and to taste the honey of her mouth. This poem is characterized by plain style, easy rhythm, and a spontaneous and smooth flow of feelings, rather than ostentatious imagery. The seductive power of the lover is accentuated by both content and form in the poem. In essence the poem is a seductive monologue of a lover addressed to her beloved in which she promises him a paradise of pleasure and delight: "Come to my abode, Shalom . . . indulge in happiness, Shalom . . . I will delight in you, Shalom." The recurring invocation of the beloved's name, Shalom, at the end of each stanza, the rhythmic effect of the repetitious metric unit, and the carefully interlaced rhyme—all these are bewitching, as if the lover were trying to cast a spell on her beloved. At the same time, these artistic features serve to weld the elements of this poem into a harmonious whole. The poem "Shalom" is perhaps the most subtle and alluring of the secular Yemenite love poems, which are indeed few in number.

The contact of the Yemenite Jew with Spanish Hebrew literature gave a great impetus to the development of Yemenite Hebrew literature. The Yemenites were particularly responsive to the prosodic influence of the Spanish Hebrew verse, and they incorporated into their poetic work most of its ornamental devices. These included the laws of rhythm, sound patterns, and especially the principles of Arabic quantitative metrics. But, while Spanish Hebrew literature reflected both the secular and sacred aspects of life, Yemenite Hebrew literature confined itself mainly to the spiritual realm. The secular erotic element, in particular, did not accord with the Yemenites' religious spirit. As a result, they did not care to "waste" much of their verse on it. However, the few secular poems which were composed in Yemen reflect the conflict between the magnetic power of the Spanish Hebrew literature and the negative attitude of the Yemenites towards secular love themes. This tension probably accounts for the composition of secular poems marked with simplicity and restrained erotic

expressions. In fact, these poems attained their compelling charm and power by virtue of this tension.

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